Hicks: Hoosier heritage is safe, from KKK to new anti-immigrant group

A new anti-immigration group in Indiana, Save Heritage Indiana, is being compared to the 1920s Ku Klux Klan.
The author argues that Indiana's history is rich with contributions from various immigrant groups.
The 1920s KKK negatively affected Indiana's economy and population growth for decades.
The article claims that anti-immigrant sentiment is based on falsehoods, as some counties with few immigrants suffer from population decline.

If you lived in Indiana as late as 1990, you have met, spoken with or smiled at a former member of the Ku Klux Klan.

After all, only a half-century earlier, 1 in 3 Protestant Hoosier men were members. These former Klansmen could've been the kindly old man shaking your hand as you entered church or waving from a Memorial Day parade.

Most of these men were ashamed by their youthful idiocies. After all, the 1920s Indiana Klan was an anti-immigrant grift. A number of these men were duped out of hard-earned money for the ugliest of causes.

They were right to be ashamed. The movement dampened growth across Indiana, hurting primarily small, rural counties. In the places where the Klan operated most openly, populations crashed for a half-century or longer as immigrants left or stayed away
(see https://michaeljhicks.substack.com/p/the-long-tail-of-hate). Each KKK member in the 1920s cost their county 10 residents by 1970.

The anti-immigrant racket is back. There's a new organization called Save Heritage Indiana that aims to stop immigration
(see https://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/jacob-

stewart/2025/10/29/save-heritage-indiana-republicans-immigration-populism/86933870007/).

Need a news break? Check out the all new PLAY hub with puzzles, games and more!

Never mind that immigration trends in the U.S. have already reversed or that we've shut off the 249-year magnet of talent and opportunity. There's fundraising to be done.

In that way, it is a worthy successor to the 1920s Indiana KKK.

Save Heritage Indiana is confused about the heritage we Hoosiers inherited. This land we call Indiana has been a rich immigrant destination since its founding. It's written in our names: Terre Haute, Vincennes, Versailles from the French. The Revolutionary War veterans gave us the names of heroes: Pulaski and Kosciuszko, as well as Adams, Hamilton, Marion and Jefferson.

In the early 1800s, the Germans came, Protestant and Catholic, settling farms and setting up shops. They came here to escape wars, persecution and, of course, seek economic opportunities. Then came the Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles and other Eastern Europeans. They came for the same reasons, to escape persecution and to become Americans.

And, of course, Muncie, Delaware, Kankakee, Maumee and Kokomo come from Native American tribes who gave our state its name.

The 19th- and early 20th-century migrations caused some backlash in Indiana. The anti-immigrant Know Nothing party was a serious contender to the GOP in the 1850s (Abraham Lincoln won). They hated Catholics of all stripes and immigrants from anywhere. The 1920s Klan picked up the mantle of the Know-Nothings and became a full-throated GOP institution — a "fever in the heartland," as Timothy Egan put it in his 2023 book (see https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/dissertations/2236/ and https://www.amazo

n.com/Fever-Heartland-Klans-America-Stopped/dp/0735225265).

The Hoosier GOP cast aside the Klan as our nation opened its doors after World War II. Still, Indiana has not benefited quite as fully from immigration as other states. Blame the KKK residuals.

We've suffered a half-century of brain drain and now have immigrants locating here at a fraction of the national rate.

One of the most vocal spokesmen of this new anti-immigration group, Brandon Harnish, a Wells County Council member, lives in a county where about 1 in 100 residents was born overseas, and 99.4% are citizens. Harnish claims to have "seen firsthand how the costs of mass migration fall on local governments and taxpayers" (see https://www.saveheritageindiana.org/). That is a lie.

It's worth noting that about 20% of Wells County's physicians are immigrants.

Wells County is poor, with per capita income at about 80% of the national rate. It has about half the share of college graduates as the average U.S. county. From 2010 to 2020, net migration cost Wells County 1,390 residents, or roughly 5% of its population. The long-term economic prospects are no better than frail. If Wells County suffers an immigrant problem, it is that it has far too few.

The U.S. desperately needs an honest national debate on immigration. Almost any legislated policy would be better than the one we've had for the past two decades.

Save Heritage Indiana wants to end immigration altogether, couching its concerns within the broader policy debate, but any honest appraisal demands that we call out its racism.

This new anti-immigration group is selective in its targets. It claims that

Indiana's heritage is at risk from newer immigrants, such as Haitians, Guatemalans or Indians. It is easy to expose them for what they are — old-school bigots.

Just ask Save Heritage Indiana if they are worried about the nearly 70,000 Amish who live among us, yet have kept their German language alive for more than 150 years, will not marry outside their faith and will not serve in our armed forces.

I value the Amish in Indiana, as well as the Haitians. Haitians are assimilating a lot faster
(see https://www.army.mil/article/168635/from_port_au_prince_to_west_point_maryland_guards_first_graduate). It seems there's something different about Haitians that angers these folks. I just cannot put my finger on it.

Save Heritage Indiana's website is a polished-up version of "The Fiery Cross," the Hoosier KKK newspaper of the 1920s
(see https://newspapers.library.in.gov/?a=d&d=FC19240111&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-------). It borrows the same tropes from the Know Nothings in the 1850s and the KKK in 1925 (see https://www.amazon.com/Know-Nothing-Supporting-Immigrants-Elections-Political/dp/B07D65S65N). Same lies, same ugliness.

Still, there's also a personal angle that many Hoosiers share. My wife and I are descended from families who walked to Indiana before 1805, staking Revolutionary War veteran land claims.

Our people cleared the lands and farmed them, built churches, fought across our nation's battles, ran for office and welcomed waves of immigrants. We married some immigrants: Swiss, German Catholics, Guatemalans, Welsh, Japanese and even a Kentuckian.

Those immigrants farmed, worked the assembly lines, buried children, fought our wars — and fight them still. Their descendants are teachers,

soldiers, nurses, business owners, politicians, scientists, plumbers and electricians.

These once-hated immigrants celebrate our holidays, march in Veterans Day parades, roast turkeys on Thanksgiving and shoot fireworks on Independence Day. They are us.

Those Revolutionary War veterans who walked to Indiana crafted a culture and heritage that didn't just attract, but absorbed, the best of those who came after it. My heritage, the Spirit of 1776, decisively won the culture wars.

That proud Hoosier heritage is powerful and has no need for a bunch of ideologically limp, resentment-filled, grifter lads to form a nonprofit to protect it.

Michael J. Hicks is the director of the Center for Business and Economic Research and the George and Frances Ball distinguished professor of economics in the Miller College of Business at Ball State University.

Muncie Star Press, Nov. 25, 2025